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ROBERTO AGUIRRE-SACASA • SEAN CHEN • SCOTT HANNA

The Sensational SPIDER-MAN®

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-Crain-

SINCE THE WAR BEGAN, MARY JANE'S BEEN HAVING THIS RECURRING DREAM.

(THE NIGHTS SHE'S ACTUALLY BEEN ABLE TO SLEEP.)

SHE'S IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ENORMOUS AMPHITHEATER, LIKE THE COLISEUM IN ANCIENT ROME, WHERE GLADIATORS FOUGHT TO THE DEATH, AND THE MORE BLOOD, THE BETTER.

SHE WONDERS, IN THE DREAM, IF SHE ISN'T IN A PLAY--

("MACBETH, I WAS REHEARSING MACBETH...")

--BUT SHE LOOKS DOWN AND SEES SHE'S NOT WEARING ANY KIND OF COSTUME.

THEN SHE LOOKS UP...

...INTO THE STANDS THAT RISE ALL AROUND HER LIKE MOUNTAINS. LIKE SACRIFICIAL TEMPLES BUILT TO DARK, HUNGRY GODS...

THEY'RE ALL THERE, GRINNING AND SPITTING AND EATING POPCORN AND FUNNEL CAKES AND HOT DOGS AND CANDY APPLES. IT'S LIKE HALLOWEEN AND A YANKEES/RED SOX GAME AND A MADONNA CONCERT ALL IN ONE.

THE MONSTERS WHO HAVE TRIED TO KILL HER HUSBAND--WHO HAVE TRIED TO KILL HER--OVER THE YEARS.

LOOKING DOWN AT HER AND JEERING, SHOUTING THE MOST...

...THE MOST UNSPEAKABLE, VILE THINGS.

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The Husband or the Spider?

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It's like bamboo sticks jabbing in her ears.

Mary Jane makes herself not scream-- not cry--not fall apart.

She turns to look away...

...and her eyes land on the Emperor.

Fine day for it, hmmm?

("But that's... that's Tony, not...not...")

It's because of him that she's been brought here. For his amusement and pleasure.

Mary Jane starts pinching herself. To wake up, wake up, wake up!

Before things get worse.

(Too late, though; they do.)

Because she looks from the Emperor...

...To his queen.

Who looks familiar, somehow.

Oh, that's right:

Gwen.

WE SHOULD GET STARTED. I'M MEETING *NORMAN* AT THE BRIDGE IN HALF AN HOUR.

UNLESS... DO YOU THINK I SHOULD *SKIP* IT?

OH, NO, HE'D BE *CRUSHED.*

BESIDES... IT'S *ALREADY* BEGUN.

TIME TO *CHOOSE...*

IN HER DREAM, MARY JANE REMEMBERS READING THE NOVEL "KISS OF THE SPIDER-WOMAN" YEARS AGO, THE SUMMER SHE GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL.

...I HOPE YOU'RE *READY.*

IN IT, THE SPIDER-WOMAN WAS THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH.

MADAME WEB? OH, THANK *GOD.*

PETER'S *TOLD ME* HE'S BEEN VISITING YOU...

QUI? JE NE CONNAIS PAS CE..."PETER."

AND, *ENCORE,* IT'S TIME TO *CHOOSE.*

TWO IDENTICAL *DOORS.*

BEHIND ONE: A MAN, YOUR *PRIZE.* BEHIND THE OTHER: A SPIDER, YOUR *DOOM.*

MAKE YOUR SELECTION... *NOW.*

SHE LISTENS TO THE MURMURINGS IN HER CHEST--

--HER HEART--

--AND REACHES FOR THE DOOR ON THE RIGHT--

--AND--

AUGHHH...

HHHHHHRRRR

CONAIR

RRRHHHNNN

IT'S THE KIND OF NIGHTMARE YOU CARRY AROUND ALL DAY LONG.

THE KIND THAT WEIGHS ON YOU LIKE A WINTER COAT.

THESE DAYS, MARY JANE'S CAREFUL ABOUT HOW SHE LOOKS.

NO MAKE UP, HER HAIR PULLED BACK IN A PONYTAIL, THE PLAINEST CLOTHES SHE HAS.

IT'S A FAR CRY FROM HER HEYDAY, WHEN SHE SPENT MORE TIME WORRYING ABOUT HER FRIDAY NIGHT OUTFIT--

--AND WHAT DANCE CLUB SHE'D BE CLOSING DOWN--

--AND WITH WHICH PAGE SIX HOTTIE SHE'D BE DOING THAT--

--THAN-THAN--

"MARY JANE? WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO?"

OH! MAY, WHAT ARE YOU...?

...WHY ARE YOU SITTING WITH THE LIGHTS OFF?

AM I? I DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE...

I WAS THINKING ABOUT POOR PETER, I'M AFRAID. AND ALL THAT HE'S BEEN THROUGH LATELY, ALL THE *CHANGES*. OH, MARY JANE, I'M NOT SURE HE CAN *TAKE* MUCH MORE OF THIS...

WHICH IS, OF COURSE, MAY'S WAY OF SAYING: "I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH MORE OF THIS I CAN TAKE."

I...I'VE GIVEN UP ON *UNDERESTIMATING* YOUR NEPHEW, MAY. I DON'T THINK THERE'S *ANY* ATTACK HE *WOULDN'T* BOUNCE BACK FROM...

"...HOWEVER BIG AND BAD IT IS."

COME ON, RHINO--

--GIVE IT A REST!!!

URRUGGHHAARR!!

NO, I KNOW.

I SUPPOSE A PART OF ME STILL THINKS OF HIM AS THAT SCARED, SKINNY, *LONELY* LITTLE BOY HE USED TO BE.

MAY...

...I'M...

...I'M GONNA HEAD OUT FOR A BIT. DO YOU... NEED ANY-THING?

NO, I'M ALL RIGHT HERE, WITH MY...

...WELL, I WAS GOING TO SAY "WITH MY MEMORIES," BUT THAT WOULD MAKE ME SOUND *OLD* AND *FOOLISH*, WOULDN'T IT?

NOT AT ALL, I'VE BEEN... *REFLECTING* A LOT, TOO.

MARY JANE, WHEREVER YOU'RE GOING RIGHT NOW, EVEN THOUGH PETER TOLD US TO STAY PUT...

...YOU *ARE* COMING BACK, AREN'T YOU?

...OF COURSE, AUNT MAY...

"...WHERE WOULD I *POSSIBLY* DISAPPEAR TO?"

IN THE NEXT THREE HOURS, THERE ARE BUSES LEAVING FOR CHICAGO, BOSTON AND WASHINGTON, D.C. NONE OF THEM PLACES SHE'S IMAGINED LIVING, BUT ALSO...NONE OF THEM **NEW YORK.**

(MARY JANE MAKES A NOTE OF THE TIMES AND GATES.)

EXCUSE ME--

--PARDON ME, *MISS?*

YES? WHAT'S--?

AREN'T YOU *HER?* THAT ACTRESS? YOU KNOW...

...MRS. SPIDER-MAN?

PEOPLE USED TO STOP HER FOR AUTOGRAPHS. SHE HAD **FANS.** A CAREER. A LIFE... HER **OWN** LIFE...

NO, THAT'S SOMEONE **ELSE.**

I LOOK LIKE HER, BUT I'M NOT AN ACTRESS, I'M NOT...

(SHE STOPS HERSELF FROM SAYING "ANY-THING.")

YEAH, YOU *DO* LOOK LIKE HER...

...BUT NOW THAT I'M UP CLOSE, *SHE'S* PRETTIER.

MARY JANE FEELS HER RIGHT HAND **CLENCH** INTO A FIST AND--

HERO ACTS

MJ CONSIDERS IT A MINOR VICTORY THAT SHE DIDN'T PUMMEL THAT WOMAN IN THE BUS STATION.

(SHE'S BEEN COLLECTING A LOT OF MINOR VICTORIES THESE DAYS, THINGS SHE USED TO TAKE FOR GRANTED.)

IT WOULD BE EASIER, IF THERE WAS SOMEONE SHE COULD TALK TO. SOMEONE WHO WOULD UNDERSTAND HER, WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE...

...TO BE...

MJ, IT'S SUE...I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT YOU CAN ALWAYS COME SEE ME IF YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT ALL THIS. MAYBE WE COULD GET TOGETHER FOR DINNER AGAIN SOON.

MIRACULOUSLY, THE NUMBER'S IN HER CELL PHONE.

MIRACULOUSLY, SUSAN RICHARDS ANSWERS.

SLOW DOWN, MARY JANE, YOU'RE TALKING TOO--

AND CAN SPARE SOME TIME.

PLANS ARE MADE...

...AND MARY JANE DECIDES TO MAKE ONE QUICK STOP BEFORE MEETING THE INVISIBLE WOMAN.

THE THEATER WHERE SHE'D BEEN REHEARSING.

MACBETH

POSTPONED

BRILLIANT

THE PRODUCERS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE KIND OF...*ATTENTION* YOUR PRESENCE MIGHT BRING TO THE SHOW.

...

WE TRULY *ARE* HEARTBROKEN ABOUT IT, LOVE...

EXIT

OF COURSE THEY HAD TO REPLACE HER, AND IT IS ONLY OFF-BROADWAY, BUT STILL...

HALF AN HOUR LATER, AT THEIR DESIGNATED MEETING TIME AND PLACE.

IT SEEMED AN ODD CHOICE, MADAME TUSSAUD'S WAX MUSEUM IN TIMES SQUARE.

SPECIFICALLY, ITS HALL OF HEROES.

BUT UNDER THE CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE, OPTIONS ARE LIMITED, AND...

...THE *GOOD THING* ABOUT THIS PLACE IS THAT NO SELF-RESPECTING *HERO* WOULD BE CAUGHT *DEAD* HERE.

HI, MARY JANE. SORRY I'M LATE.

MARY JANE THINKS SHE SEES A SLIGHT DISTORTION IN THE AIR ON HER RIGHT, SO SHE TURNS TO IT AND SAYS:

UH, NO PROBLEM. THANKS FOR MEETING ME... UH...

IT'S ALL RIGHT, YOU CAN CALL ME SUE.

AND I'M STANDING TO YOUR *LEFT*, BY THE WAY.

UH... OKAY. SORRY, I JUST...

...I MEAN, THIS IS KIND OF WEIRD.

I UNDERSTAND. THERE'S A CAFETERIA ON THE FOURTH FLOOR. WE CAN GO THERE, IF YOU WANT...

THAT WOULD BE GREAT.

(ESPECIALLY SINCE, YOU KNOW, PEOPLE ARE STARTING TO *STARE*.)

BETTER?

MUCH.

YOU WOULD THINK LIVING WITH THE AVENGERS I WOULD'VE GOTTEN *USED* TO SUPER-POWERS...BUT I GUESS I STILL HAVE A LOW THRESHOLD.

SALA

SOME THINGS, YOU *NEVER* GET USED TO. LIKE THE WAY REED'S BODY...*SHIFTS* WHEN HE'S NOT CONCENTRATING ON ITS INTEGRITY, FOR INSTANCE. IT'S LIKE WATCHING AN ICE-CREAM SUNDAE *MELT* IN SLOW MOTION...

HOW... HOW *IS* YOUR HUSBAND?

HIGH F

...

I'M NOT GOING TO *LIE* TO YOU, MARY JANE. WE'RE IN A BAD PLACE RIGHT NOW. MAYBE THE *WORST* WE'VE EVER BEEN.

YEAH, I...

...I'VE SEEN SOME OF THE PRESS.

THEY *DO* LIKE THEIR HEADLINES, DON'T THEY?

HOW ARE YOU AND *PETER* DOING?

CAF

WE'RE...

I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T *KNOW* HOW WE ARE...

NO, THAT'S NOT TRUE, WE'RE *OVERWHELMED* AND...

...EVERYTHING'S *EXHAUSTING*, EVERYTHING'S *HARROWING*.

I DON'T KNOW, SUE...

...I DON'T KNOW HOW *YOU PEOPLE* DO THIS.

WE-ELL...

...IT'S NOT EASY, AND IT DOESN'T...

...IT *NEVER* GETS EASIER, MARY JANE.

YOU JUST HAVE TO ASK YOURSELF: WHAT CAN YOU *LIVE* WITH? HOW MUCH ARE YOU *WILLING* TO SACRIFICE?

...

IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE I'M *LIVING* RIGHT NOW.

AND ALL I *DO* IS SACRIFICE, EVERY DAY, MORE AND MORE OF MYSELF.

MARY JANE...

...DO YOU *LOVE* PETER?

WHAT?

YES. GOD, YES.

ALL RIGHT, THEN...

TOUGHEN UP.

PA- PARDON?

YOU KNEW WHO PETER WAS BEFORE YOU MARRIED HIM, DIDN'T YOU? YOU KNEW ABOUT SPIDER-MAN?

YES, I...

YOU DON'T HAVE TO MAKE UP ANOTHER OF YOUR PHONY EXCUSES, PETER, NOT NOW...

I KNOW THE TRUTH! THE *REAL* TRUTH!

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

...I KNEW. I KNEW. EVERYTHING.

THEN AT SOME POINT...YOU MADE A *CHOICE.* TO TIE YOUR LIFE TO THIS MAN.

THE WAY I DID WITH REED. AND JESSICA DID WITH LUKE. AND STORM DID WITH T'CHALLA.

WHEN THINGS GET *HOPELESS,* DO YOU KNOW WHAT I DO?

I GO BACK TO THAT MOMENT, THAT *CHOICE,* AND I REMEMBER:

THE *CERTAINTY* I FELT. THE *STRENGTH* I HAD.

WE'RE IN A *WAR,* MARY JANE. THIS ISN'T THE TIME TO *BUCKLE.*

IT'S THE TIME TO FIND WHAT YOU'RE *MADE OF.* AND LEARN HOW *RESILIENT* YOUR LOVE REALLY IS.

THEY TALK AWHILE LONGER. THEN THEY PAY THEIR BILL, AND MARY JANE THANKS THE INVISIBLE WOMAN FOR HER TIME, AND STANDS TO GO.

SHE DOESN'T WANT TO SAY IT, BUT SHE CAN'T HELP HERSELF:

ALL THOSE WOMEN YOU MENTIONED... YOU, JESSICA, STORM...

...YOU'RE ALL SUPER-POWERED.

I DON'T *HAVE* THAT TO LEAN ON.

TEN BLOCKS LATER, THOUGH, THE INVISIBLE WOMAN'S WORDS STILL HAUNT HER.

AND SHE FINDS HERSELF FIGHTING TO REMEMBER THE MOMENT.

WHEN SHE DECIDED: "MY LIFE IS WITH THIS MAN, FOREVER AND ALWAYS."

IT WAS BEFORE THEY GOT MARRIED...

(WAS IT WHEN SHE CONFRONTED HIM ABOUT HIS SECRET?)

NO, BEFORE THAT, AS WELL. IT WAS...

WE SHOULD GET STARTED. I'M MEETING *NORMAN* AT THE BRIDGE IN HALF AN HOUR.

AND AS QUICK AS TAKING A BREATH, IT COMES BACK TO HER.

SHE'D JUST HEARD THE NEWS ABOUT GWEN'S DEATH AT THE HANDS OF THE GREEN GOBLIN.

BEREFT, SHE WAITED FOR PETER AT HIS APARTMENT, IMAGINING THE SICKENING SOUND OF GWEN'S NECK SNAPPING.

SHE HEARS HIS KEY IN THE LOCK, WATCHES HIM PUSH OPEN THE DOOR...AND CURSES HERSELF FOR NOT THINKING OF WHAT TO SAY IN ADVANCE.

HEY, PETER, I HEARD ABOUT GWEN. I'M REALLY TORN UP--

HIS ANGER ISN'T UNEXPECTED; ITS VICIOUSNESS IS.

YOU? "TORN UP"? DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH, MARY JANE. YOU WOULDN'T BE SORRY IF YOUR OWN *MOTHER* DIED. WHAT DO *YOU* CARE ABOUT STRAIGHTS LIKE ME AND *GWEN?*

HIS WORDS ARE LIKE FISTS, PUMMELING HER TOWARDS THE OPEN DOOR.

GO ON-- GET OUT OF HERE.

I KNOW HOW YOU HATE *SICKBEDS.*

AND HER FIRST IMPULSE WAS TO GO, TO FLEE THE HORROR AND PAIN STARTING TO ENVELOP THIS MAN'S LIFE...

...BUT THEN SHE STOPPED.

AND SEARCHED HER HEART.

AND MADE A CHOICE.

AND A DOOR CLOSES IN THE PAST...

CLICK!

...AS, IN THE PRESENT, MARY JANE FACES ANOTHER ONE, THINKING:

"THAT WAS WHEN I KNEW I WAS IN LOVE WITH HIM. THAT DAY IN HIS APARTMENT, AFTER GWEN. WHEN NOTHING WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN MY BEING WITH HIM."

237

FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR, SHE HEARS A SHUFFLING. A STRANGE, THUMPING SOUND. MAY'S VOICE, MUFFLED.

SHE REACHES FOR THE DOORKNOB...

...AND THE DREAM FROM LAST NIGHT RISES. SUDDENLY, SHE'S BACK IN THAT ARENA AGAIN...

CHOOSE YOUR PATH.

THE OLD WOMAN AGAIN. (SPEAKING, MARY JANE REALIZES NOW, WITH MAY'S VOICE.)

THE THING IS...

I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU...

...I'M NOT GOING TO DO THIS WITHOUT YOUR GUYS'S SUPPORT...

...I ALREADY CHOSE, YEARS AGO.

FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE.

SO ALL OF YOU...
CAN. GO. TO--
EYES SHUT, SHE THROWS THE DOOR OPEN--
--AND IN HER MIND, PETER'S THERE--
YOU WEREN'T KIDDING ABOUT THE JACKPOT. C'MERE, GORGEOUS.
--AND EVERY-THING IS GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT.
IN REALITY, THOUGH, SHE THROWS THE DOOR TO THEIR SAFE HOUSE OPEN--
PETER? MAY?

--AND NOTHING WILL EVER BE ALL RIGHT AGAIN.

MARY JANE! HELP ME!

HELP ME!